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ABSTRACT

Merit pay plans for administrators do not work in school systems in which the governing board is elected from among lay people. In 1979, the Brewster (New York) Central School District developed an administrator merit pay plan. The goal of the plan was to implement changes and programs which would reflect the needs of the community as interpreted by the school board. For three years the plan worked well, but the board membership gradually turned over. The new members never understood the value of the merit pay plan. Merit increases were abandoned in favor of flat raises, a change which caused resentment among the administrators. Some of the stronger features of the plan are still being preserved; however, it is clear that administrator merit pay plans cannot work in school systems with board members who are unfamiliar with the internal workings and history of public schools. (DC)

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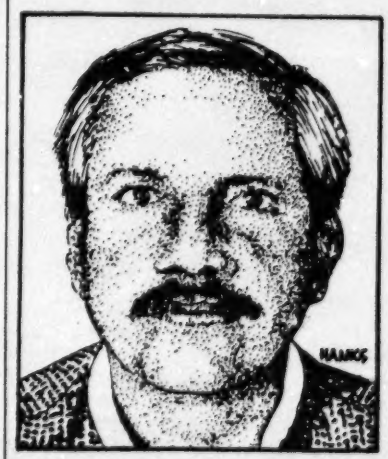
My sad conclusion: Board turnover precludes merit pay for administrators

IT HAS TAKEN ME four years of work, ten years of thought, and many sleepless nights to reach this disturbing conclusion: Merit pay simply does not work for administrators in public schools.

All the steps and all the machinery carefully were put into place for an excellent system of merit pay in our Brewster (New York) schools. The system of administrative evaluation we adopted was patterned on the management-by-objectives concept and was implemented to fit the needs and goals of the 13 administrators employed for our 2,500-pupil, 165-teacher system. The plan called for each of the 12 "middle management" administrators to meet annually with me (as superintendent) and determine from four to six worthwhile individual objectives in addition to their regular responsibilities. The goals were to reflect the needs of the community as the school board interpreted them.

As we implemented the program in 1979, all the administrators, in my opinion, felt comfortable and confident that what they set out to accomplish eventually would be appreciated and admired by the community. And in fact, during the system's first three years of operation, the community and board liked what they saw: a vastly improved interscholastic athletic program; higher academic standards in the high school; an international student-exchange program; improved procedures for school maintenance, insurance, transportation, and investments; better guidance programs for college-bound students; more frequent and effective teacher evaluation; and detailed curriculum guides for all subject areas. The board responded by accepting my recommendations for administrator merit pay increases in each of the program's first three years.



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But one problem ultimately undermined the program: The board that had endorsed merit pay gradually turned over, and the new board members never came to understand the pains their predecessors had gone through to establish the system, nor did they fully appreciate the reasons for the many positive changes the school system had seen in the previous three years.

Last year—our fourth year with a system of merit pay—my evaluations of subordinates and recommendations for increases essentially were ignored. Board members decided the percentage increases they had established for teachers were just fine for administrators, too. In other words, the board gave the same consideration to highly accountable middle managers that it gave to 165 employes whose pay was linked not to performance, but to years of service and numbers of graduate hours accumulated. Result: As superintendent, I lost faith in the system, and before long, my lack of confidence triggered the same response among other administrators.

The final blow came when the board determined that all administrators doing a good job arbitrarily would receive a flat dollar amount, regardless of their current rates of pay. This meant that one principal might receive a 6 percent increase, while another received 9 percent. The board's intention, perhaps, was admirable enough—to treat everyone equally—but the decision served only to raise resentment and dissension among the very people it relied on most heavily to carry out its directions.

We're still working to preserve some of the stronger features of the system, such as management by objectives and differential pay raises. The success of the program, however, has been damaged severely, and I attribute that to the changing leadership inherent in public school governance. It's not realistic to expect that situation to change. And it's not likely that new board members will learn to accept established standards or procedures without wanting to exert their own influence. (After all, they were elected to impose their will.)

Consequently, merit pay will not work, has not worked, cannot work in the public schools of New York State, nor for that matter in any school system that elects its governing board from among lay persons who are unfamiliar with the internal workings and history of the institution of the public schools.

I believe this reflects an inherent weakness in the public school systems of the U.S. We cannot expect that an organization of any kind can survive with such a changing, unfamiliar (a harsher, but more accurate, word might be "uninformed"), publicly scrutinized, frequently second-guessed, and voluntary governing body.

The proof of my point: the lack of systems of merit pay in public schools, the lack of stability among school superintendents and middle managers, and the serious erosion of confidence in public schools throughout the U.S.—all the result of inconsistent governance and fractionalized interest of frequently elected bosses. It's a grim picture. ■

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